

Member of Canadian Delegation

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NOTES FOR A STATEMENT BY HON. ROMEO LEBLANC, GENEVA

APRIL 30, 1975.

I am pleased to see that, in informal working groups, considerable progress has been made in developing various draft articles on the living resources of the sea which have a significant measure of support in the conference. Of course all countries have reservations about specific details of various drafts and I am sure that no one here feels that the interests of his country have been fully met in at least some drafts. Nevertheless the development of unified negotiating texts, is indispensable. I congratulate those who have participated with sincerity, good-will and statemanship in this essential work. I might add a special word for all members of Canada's delegation.

I firmly believe that the conference now must attack the remaining problems with urgency and with determination to reach agreement as soon as possible. In our view, the reason for urgency is very simple: the living resources of the sea - the fish, are in danger. This is particularly true in areas where intensive fisheries have been conducted for many years and stocks are being depleted at an accelerating rate. It takes time to restore depleted stocks; for some it will take many years. Every year that a global agreement escapes us the damage is greater and the recovery period longer.

State Dept. review completed

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Canada's origins are closely bound to fisheries. Almost 500 years ago John Cabot explored the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and said he found cod so abundant he could fill a basket lowered over the side to the brim. From these beginnings grew the fishing communities of Newfoundland and the Maritime provinces of Canada. These communities are vitally dependent on fish and fishing for their basic existence. In the vivid words of our distinguished colleague from Iceland, Newfoundland, just as Iceland, might formerly have been defined as a rock surrounded by fish.

I say "formerly" because the last few years have seen a tragic decline in the catches by Canada's Atlantic fishermen. One by one the stocks of vital concern to them have decreased--some below any biologically accepted minimum level. Most others can no longer be fished economically.

These circumstances have created severe economic problems threatening the existence of many Canadian coastal communities. There is no prospect for improvement this year, indeed further declines are expected and 1976 will probably be worse. John Cabot would be a very disappointed man if he dropped his basket over the side today.

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Canada's problem is not unique. In virtually every area where intensive international fisheries have operated for many years the story is very similar. In such areas sophisticated scientific techniques have often been brought to bear on the problems of overfishing. These have had little effect under present jurisdictional arrangements. In other parts of the world, where intensive fisheries are just beginning to build, times may still seem relatively good; as fisheries build so does the optimism of the fishermen. But the same story has been repeated again and again in international fisheries - fisheries build beyond the capacity of the resources to sustain them and the result is depletion and economic and social disaster for coastal communities, particularly for small boat fishermen who do not have the option of fishing elsewhere.

A number of states represented in this Conference see resources lying at their doorstep undergoing initial exploitation by an international fleet and being subjected to expanding development. From bitter experience we can assure them that, with modern technology, a year or two can convert dreams of an expanding future for coastal fishermen and coastal communities to bankruptcy and social dislocation.

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What is the reason for the decline in the catch by Canadian fishermen off our shores, for instance? The main reason is not Canada's doing. The expanding development of distant water fishing activities has not only pre-empted the opportunities of Canadian fishermen but has resulted in excess fishing effort that has driven the stocks to their present low levels. A decrease in such distant-water fishing effort is essential to restore the stocks and the balance between resource availability and fishing capacity.

How can such objectives be achieved? Canada is bending every effort to reach a broad multilateral agreement through this Conference and to create a regime providing for the wise use of living resources for the benefit of all. We are committed to give other states access to our economic zone to take surpluses beyond Canada's capacity to harvest. We are committed to full consultation regarding management and allocation with nations fishing in our zone. Regardless of the mechanism, however, we must ensure a reduction of distant-water fishing effort off our shores. This will not only improve Canadian opportunities but will also allow other states to fish the surplus in a more efficient and profitable manner.

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Our commitment to multilateral agreement is deep, but our ability to wait is limited by harsh realities as we move into a new fishing season in which further declines in our stocks are expected. We must ask ourselves seriously whether or not time is running out. Fishermen cannot eat negotiating texts. Fish stocks cannot be rebuilt on negotiating texts. I urge delegates in the few days remaining to them to press forward with an intensity commensurate with the severity of the problems that beset us.

This conference is not the only forum in which fisheries problems will be discussed in the next few months. In various multilateral organizations and in bilateral discussions, Canada will be appealing to nations fishing off our shores to face the facts of appalling declines in abundance of the stocks and to be prepared to accept the stringent conservation measures that are undeniably needed to halt these declines.

I make these appeals in all sincerity, believing that a broad accord is the best basis for an equitable settlement. However, under existing conditions, I do not think it unreasonable for beleaguered coastal states, such as Canada, to explore possibilities of protecting their justifiable interests. I can assure you that

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such possibilities are being debated by the Canadian public at the present time. It is not difficult to imagine the direction of thinking of a Canadian fisherman standing on shore with an empty net.

However, I did not come here to rattle sabres. My remarks have been made to stress the urgency of achieving global, regional and bilateral negotiations to stop resource depletion and establish a firm basis for management of the fisheries of the world in the future. I am appealing for co-operation, a co-operation which recognizes the legitimate rights of coastal fishermen and the interests of other nations which fish the same stocks. Most of all we must recognize that depleting fish stocks benefits no one. I make this appeal because I am convinced that other countries are as deeply committed as Canada to developing a practical framework for the solution of resource problems that now seem intractable. Our mutual sincerity will be tested when we review the results of this session of the conference and see their effects on international fisheries relations in the near future. If the results are found lacking, a deep sense of disappointment may set in. I hope this will not be the case.